

INITIAL ATTEMPTS TO CREATE MOVING PICTURES

Cinema is a creative medium combining art and technology. It is a powerful means of entertainment and education of the masses. This complex art, which depicts life through moving and singing images, is an offspring of photography and technical skill.

Inventors in America, Britain, Germany and France were experimenting with moving pictures for a number of years. In 1640, Zeus Kirkhar of Rome achieved some success, but there was no further progress. In the nineteenth century, the research in this regard received good momentum. George Eastman, an imaginative man of New York, invented in 1889 the photographic film used today. Thereafter British inventor William Friese Greene made a camera, which could use the film for moving pictures. He made considerable progress in moving the pictures and in projecting them on a screen. He is, therefore, regarded as the father of cinema. The same year, a French inventor, L.A.A. Prince, also developed a camera. By coincidence, it was the same year that Thomas Edison developed two machines, the kinetoscope and the kinetograph. The former could be used for filming while with the latter, one could see the pictures moving, by using a lever. These films were, of course, of a few seconds' duration. The machines were installed in shops and were, therefore, known as 'shop show', 'peep show', 'store show' or 'nickelodeon'.

The year 1889 is an important one in the history of cinema. It was in this year that in India, a versatile engineer of Mumbai, Maadanrao Madhavrao Chitale, painted some events from the life of Shrikrishna on slides. With the aid of a magic lantern, he showed them to audiences for fun. It created an impression of seeing a movie. Then Mahadeo Gopal Patwardhan of Kalyan thought that this could become a business and obtained an old magic lantern. His elder son Vinayak studied drawing and painting at the J. J. School of Art and made himself adept in both the skills of painting pictures on glass and creating a make-believe movie by using a magic lantern. He made a magic lantern at home using lamps like those used at railway stations or by high-ranking government officers.

The Patwardhan father and son duo got an early opportunity to present their newly acquired art to an audience. They called their show *Shambarik Kharolika* and explained the meaning of this strange-sounding, seemingly difficult name thus:

Shambarik means magic and *kharolika* means a lantern. 'Magi' means *shambarasur*, from which we derived a concise word *shambarik*. The Marathi words for lantern are 'deep' and 'diva'. They are, however, worn out by too much use. So, we discovered the word 'kharolika' for it from 'Amarkosh' (a thesaurus) as an alternative word and gave currency to the expression '*Shambarik Kharolika*' for 'Magic Lantern'.

"Why should we need an English word at all?" he would say. A detailed description of their show is found in Prabodhankar Thakaray's autobiography, *Mazi Jeevengatha* (The Saga of My Life).

Along with Vinayakrao, his younger brother Ramchandra too became an expert in both the jobs. To encourage their new art, many people from Mumbai's high society got them to hold shows of *Shambarik Kharolika* in their homes. As the shows became popular, they got

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invitations to hold special shows for seeing the events in the life of Shrikrishna depicted by them. Due to the huge response received by them at different places in Ganesh festivals, the interest and enthusiasm of the Patwardhan father and sons increased many fold and they started holding stage shows of *Shambarik Kharolika* in theatres by sale of tickets. The price of tickets ranged from one anna to four annas.

Deciding to make a profession of these shows, the Patwardhan father and sons went all out in their efforts. Both the brothers had scored high marks at the matriculation examination. Rambhau had mastery over English. It was decided that one of them would continue with his service in the railways and the other would concentrate all his attention on *Shambarik Kharolika*. Vinayakrao painted on slides a story with the backdrop of a circus. Pleased that the Patwardhans had depicted on a screen a circus like their own, Kashinathpant and Vishnupant Chhatre, the two proprietors of Chhatre's Grand Circus, gave financial assistance to the Patwardhans in appreciation of the indigenous art. The Patwardhan Brothers used for their slides the paintings of the well-known painters Ravi Verma and Madhavrao Dhurandhar.

To make the movements and the acting on the screen more effective, the Patwardhans conceived the idea of using three magic lanterns instead of one. Two of them were used for showing movements and acting and the third for depicting the background decor such as forests, gardens, roads, rivers, palaces, clouds, mountains etc. This trick was wholly successful as they achieved the desired effect on the screen. A ten-foot long and ten-foot wide wet piece of cloth was used as a screen. Whenever the number of viewers increased, some of them would be seated on the other side of the screen too. According to a recorded estimate, the number of viewers had gone up to one thousand.

The show would begin with the appearance of an

artistic board reading: "Welcome —Patwardhan Brothers, *Shambarik Kharolika*". A compere flanked on two sides by two tambora-wielding singers followed the 'Welcome' sign, as per the conventions of the period. The Patwardhan Brothers would handle the magic lanterns with such finesse that the action of the singers fingering the wires of the *tambora* and that of the compere greeting the audience appeared very real. Showing the movements of lips and fingers accurately in appropriate places required real skill.

After the invocation by the compere, the singers would depart and the next scene would show the compere inviting his female counterpart, the *Nati*. Her movements were like a dancer's. The Patwardhan Brothers had acquired such mastery over handling the magic lanterns that the movements of the *Nati* appeared quite genuine as in a moving picture. As the Patwardhan Brothers' paintings were true to scale, clear-cut and attractive, the scenes were very beautiful to look at.

The invocation would be followed by the story. It was generally mythological. Once in a while, it would be of an adventure too. Because of their good success in the business, the Patwardhans undertook a running tour of Maharashtra and Gujarat and ended it on 27th December 1895 at the 11th session of the National Congress held in Pune. They held a show of *Shambarik Kharolika* for Lokmanya Tilak, Justice Ranade, the Hon. Mr Gokhale, and Congress President Surendranath Bannerjee who acclaimed it. They also organised shows at the Anandodbhawan theatre in Budhwar Chowk of Pune by sale of tickets and the audience admired them to no end. The earnings too were huge. Mahadeo Gopal Patwardhan died in 1902. About the same time the Patwardhan Brothers had filmed three movies: *Seeta Swayamvar*, *Raja Harishchandra* and *Ramrajya Abhishek*.

In order to show movements, three small pictures were painted on a four-inch glass slide. It took three to four days

to paint one picture. An adequate number of such slides would make up a story in pictures. The Patwardhan Brothers would be so engrossed in the complicated work of painting the pictures that they were oblivious of hunger and thirst.

The Patwardhan Brothers also obtained the services of renowned authors to write running commentaries appropriate to the various movies to make them more appealing and entertaining to the audience. Not only that, they added music to their shows. Being good connoisseurs of music, the Patwardhan Brothers were able to play *tabla* and harmonium. For some episodes they also got written dialogues and songs for which they got a lot of help from *Kirtankar* Joshi, a teacher by profession. The songs described the scenes. Their outfit included children with melodious voice to sing the songs, sitting by the side of the screen.

In one scene from the life of Shrikrishna, Vasudeo carries the baby Shrikrishna over his head across a river. The river parts but the water goes on rising. But, as it touches the feet of the baby, its level recedes rapidly. The scene, which was contrived with slides, dumbstruck the audience. In 1958, the audiences admired the scene from the movie *Ten Commandments* in which the sea parts to allow chariots to run through it. The success of Patwardhan Brothers in achieving the same effect about 65 years earlier deserves to be admired.

Many foreigners endorsed the view that the Patwardhan Brothers' amazing art of creating an illusion of a movie from a hand-painted story on four-inch glass slides was unprecedented not only in India but the world over. Some of those laudatory references are still available. Mr Jackson, Collector of Nashik, was murdered in the second week of May 1909. He had witnessed the *Shambarik Kharolika* show only the previous day. His letter of appreciation is also among other such commendations. In the matrix of even a mythological story, the Patwardhan

Brothers wove a strand of nationalism very suggestively.

The idea underlying *Shambarik Kharolika* was that of a cartoon and eighteen years after *Shambarik Kharolika*, that is, in 1908, the first cartoon film was produced in America. It was *Phantasmagoria* by Emil Cole. Its length was 12 feet.

In 1895, in America, Edison invented 'Vitascope', a machine to enable more than one person to view a movie. It made it possible for a gathering of people to see a movie for about a half or three quarters of a minute, on a white piece of cloth hung up on a wall or a piece of string.

In France, Lumiere Brothers too were busy experimenting on these lines. They made two machines, one for filming and the other for projecting the film. After being satisfied about their efficiency, they filmed a 20-second event and held a private showing of it for half a minute on 28th March 1895. The audience was wonderstruck as the pictures showed the actual movement of characters. The name of this tiny movie was *Lunch Hour at the Lumiere Factory*. Encouraged by the audience response, the Lumiere Brothers produced a 50-ft. movie named *Charge of the Dragon* and, on Christmas Day, 25th December 1895, exhibited it at the Grand Cafe House in Paris by sale of tickets. This was the first film show in the world! The audience count was 35 on the first day. The number went on swelling to reach the 2,000 mark. The Lumiere Brothers were then convinced that this business was going to be very profitable. They quickly produced many short films and sent their representatives to many countries to hold shows. One of their representatives came to India. He held his first show on 7th July 1896 at Watson Hotel, which stood where the Esplanade Mansion now stands near Kalaghoda in Mumbai. The show included some short films like *Arrival of a Train*, etc. Its advertisement in *The Times of India* ran like this: 'See an astounding discovery of this century, the greatest wonder of the world, the movements of life-size living images'. The tickets were priced at

Re 1.00. It was rather costly in those days, but moving pictures was a novelty, which created tremendous curiosity. The first day attracted two hundred viewers. A funny thing happened that day. As their eyes were not used to looking at moving pictures, seeing that the railway engine on the screen was closing in on them, some viewers ran outside the hotel while some others hid themselves behind chairs!

The shows in Watson Hotel continued for a week. Thereafter, from 14th July to 15th August, they were held in the then Novelty Theatre, which was housed in a shed, where 'The Excelsior' now stands. Although it was rainy season in full swing and the tickets ranged from eight annas to two rupees, they were house-full shows. That was the extent of people's attraction for these small, moving pictures.

What were these moving pictures like? The duration of every movie was a minute or a minute and a half. A show comprised 12 such movies. Scenes such as a child playing in a garden, her having breakfast with her parents, a horse running about, labourers building a wall, workers leaving their factory, a boatman rowing his boat, a train entering a station, waves tossing on the sea, dry leaves flying in the wind, a boy playing mischief with a gardener watering a garden and the latter running to catch him—such were the subjects of these short flicks. There were neither artists, nor sets. It was all location shooting. The whole show would last for fifteen to twenty minutes, but the audience was spell-bound by the movement of the images. Being in Baroda (Vadodara) at the time, Dadasaheb Phalke had not seen these movies.